

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Brother Moses Johnson 1752-1842

In the 18th century the word "housewright" would have been much more familiar to the average Maine citizen than "architect". The versatile housewright who framed structures using innate good taste and a knowledge of stresses and forces gained from experience was the one most likely to mold the appearance of the Maine village.

Brother Moses Johnson, working solely within the context of Shaker Communities, was such a man. He left his mark in Maine through his construction of two meetinghouses for the Shakers at Alfred and Sabbathday Lake. The latter survives today much in the way it was constructed in 1794. In these two Shaker villages, and in eight others in New England and eastern New York, all the Shaker churches were designed by Brother Moses, each to a nearly identical plan. These ten fine structures by Brother Moses

can be said to have been instrumental in forming what we now recognize as a "Shaker style" of architecture since, in most cases, the meetinghouse was the first building erected after the Believers gathered together to sign their Covenant. The meetinghouse, therefore, set the tone for the entire Community. All ten of the meetinghouses by Johnson were constructed in a mere nine years, between 1785 and 1794.

Little is recorded about Moses Johnson as an individual. The fact that there were three Moses Johnsons at the Enfield, New Hampshire Community has steered some scholars down the wrong path. From manuscript records of the Enfield Shaker Village now at the Canterbury Shaker Village and from interviews with Eldress Bertha Lindsay and the late Eldress Marguerite Frost, it is possible to isolate the correct man. Brother Moses, the housewright, was born at an unknown location in 1752, according to his death record and gravestone which state that he died on December 19, 1842 at the age of 90. He was living in the area of Enfield when the Shakers started their



Figure 1. Shaker Meetinghouse, Alfred, left, and Ministry Shop, right, c. 1879 view (Collection of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine).

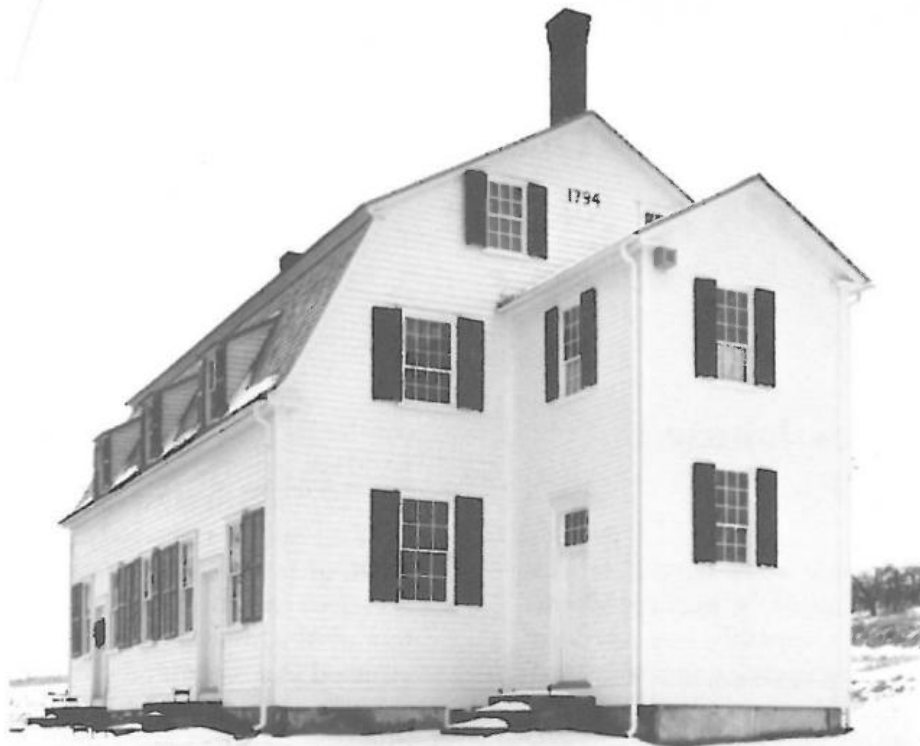


Figure 2. Shaker Meetinghouse, Sabbathday Lake, 1988 view by Richard W. Cheek.

missionary work in the region and was one of the first converts to the faith. With his wife and three children, he became a Shaker in October, 1782, at the age of 30. He was one of the original signers of the Enfield Covenant.

At that age he already would have completed any youthful apprenticeship. That he had become an experienced builder is proven by the description of him as "an expert in hewing timber, and skilled in framing for building purposes". That he was talented and trustworthy is borne out by the fact that in 1785, at 33, having demonstrated his skills at Enfield, he was chosen by the Elders to travel over 200 miles to New Lebanon, New York, the center of the sect, to be "given charge of framing the Church." So ideally did his first work suit the Shakers that it was decided all their churches would be identical in appearance, and to assure this uniformity, Brother Moses would oversee their construction. Thus, in the following nine years, he designed meetinghouses for Shaker communities in the following order: Hancock, Massachusetts; Watervliet, New York; Enfield, Connecticut; Harvard, Massachusetts; Canterbury, New Hampshire; Shirley, Massachusetts; his own community of Enfield, New Hampshire; and Alfred and Sabbathday Lake in Maine. He also erected other buildings for the Shakers.

Since all the meetinghouses were generally built on the same plan, it is reasonable to focus on the two in Maine, especially the one that survives at Sabbathday Lake. In 1791 the Alfred Shakers felt it was time to build a church, and the brothers cut and

sawed the timbers for it the next year. Brother Moses arrived from Enfield in late 1792 or early 1793 to oversee the project. At this stage, having established a reputation in the Shaker world, Johnson was probably no longer having to personally "hew timber". He was now the master builder. In every Shaker Community there were numerous trades represented, those endless rural skills all men and women possessed by the time they reached their majority and which they brought with them when they converted to the Shaker faith. At every village where he supervised, Brother Moses could call on handfuls of Shaker brothers able to use an adze, an axe, a plane, or a froe. Thus, he explained what he wanted, and the brethren set to the task. It is possible that Johnson stayed only for the frame of the structure, leaving the masonry work, finish clapboarding, shingling, and interior finish to skilled local brothers. From his verbal instructions and correspondence with villages, it was possible for Johnson to impose on his workmen the uniformity of appearance he desired even if he were not physically present throughout each project.

At Alfred, starting in late 1792 or early in the spring of 1793, the frame was cut, mortised, assembled, and raised. By fall the building was sufficiently closed in to the weather that the formal dedication could take place (Figure 1). The interior trim was completed in 1794.

At the end of that year Brother Moses was back in Maine at Sabbathday Lake. By prior agreement, he arrived to find that the brethren had hauled to

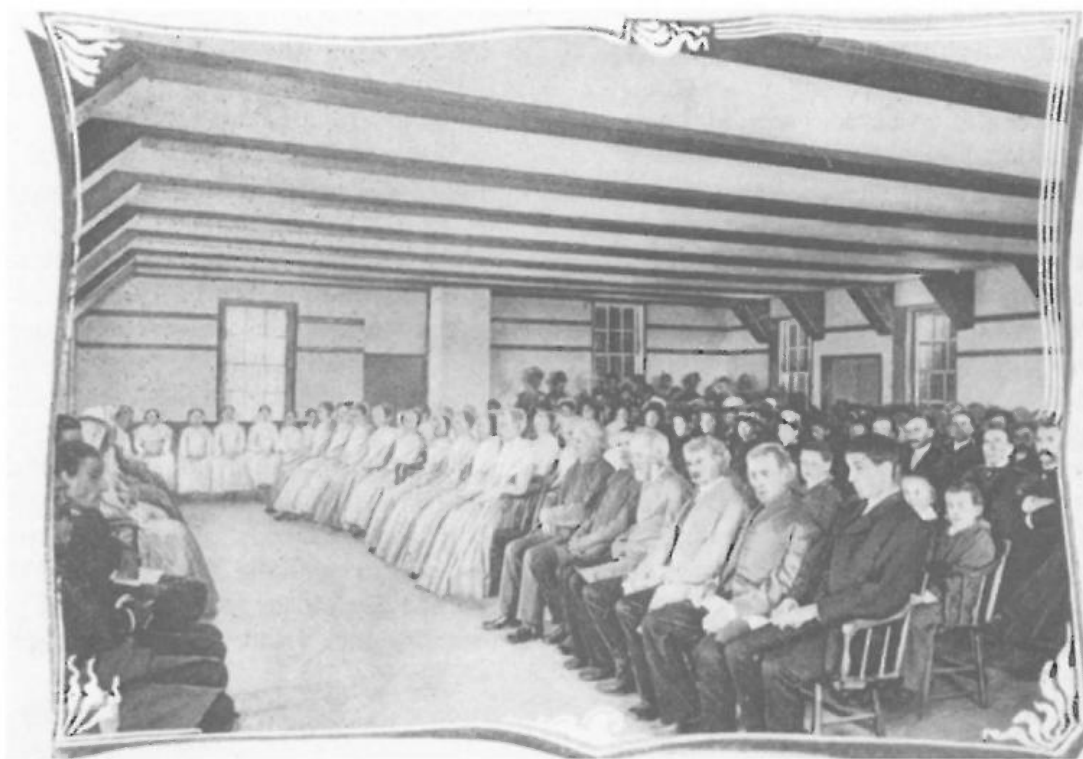


Figure 3. Interior of the Shaker Meetinghouse, Sabbathday Lake, showing a meeting, 1880 view (MHPC).

the site the large granite foundation slabs quarried from ledge on the village's property, that thousands of nails and all of the hardware had been forged, and that the bricks for the chimneys had been made from clay deposits the Shakers owned. Brother Moses told the brothers what he wanted, and construction proceeded efficiently and quickly. All outside work was done by the arrival of cold weather, and as in Alfred, the interior finish work was accomplished during the winter (Figure 2). His tenth and last meetinghouse completed, Moses Johnson returned to Enfield. Little is known of his later life. He served briefly as an Elder and died at the age of 90.

Johnson's meetinghouses are remarkable buildings. All were about the same size. Alfred was 32 feet by 40 feet, and Sabbathday Lake is 32 feet by 55 feet. Nearly all were five by two bays. On the long front façade were two doors, the left for brothers, the right for sisters. Three windows were placed between the doors and two more at each end. The lower pitch of the gambrel roof was pierced by six dormers, three on each side. The gambrel roof is the most distinctive feature of Johnson's meetinghouses. In fact, although the strength of the gambrel is well known, especially in climates with deep snowfalls, Shakers allowed no other structure to have a gambrel roof, thus preserving the unique appearance of the church in the community.

Superficially, the Shaker meetinghouses resemble Colonial gambrel-roofed buildings in the Hudson River Valley, and it has been suggested that the Shaker churches show a Dutch influence. Moses

Johnson, however, was trained in the English tradition, and the gambrel roof and braced ceiling beams, with both beams and braces boxed in, are as common in English architecture as in Dutch and are found throughout southern New England, especially in Connecticut. Furthermore, the Dutch gambrel has a considerable overhang at the eaves, a very long first pitch and a much shorter top pitch. Johnson employed pitches of about equal lengths, characteristic of the English hip roof. The steepness of the pitch that he used is also closer to the English derived gambrel than to the New York Dutch.

There were two small chimneys at the ridge, one at each end, designed to accommodate Shaker box stoves. The two-and-a-half story buildings were planned for a number of specific uses. The first floor was devoted to a large meeting room, where the sect could conduct its services (Figure 3). Upstairs rooms were provided for the members of the Ministry who lived and worked in the edifice. Besides having the two front entrances to the meeting room, there had to be two staircases at each end of the building for the male and female ministers and two separate sets of two-room sleeping and working quarters on the second floor separated by a central hall which gave room for still another staircase that lead to the half floor above. This was unfinished in some communities and used for storage; in others it was finished and used to provide two additional large guest rooms for visiting Elders and Eldresses from other communities.

Because a significant part of the Shakers' religious

worship consisted of the dances and marches that gave them their original name of "Shaking Quakers", Brother Moses had to plan the meeting room so that his massive ceiling beams and braces carried the entire weight of the floors above, providing a first floor without any bearing vertical members in the middle of the floor. This resulted in a large floor area for worship services. The huge framing members were covered with finish boards, and all the woodwork, including the window sill high wainscotting, was painted a bluish shade as specified by the Millennial Laws of the sect. The Maine Shakers interpreted this as a dark blue-green or Prussian blue which made a handsome contrast with the white plastered walls and ceilings and the yellow-white or yellow-ochre floors. Above the wainscotting, at a height of about five or six feet, were two or more rows of wooden pegs set into narrow boards. Since these peg boards extended over doors, benches, and windows where no coats or hats could logically have been hung, it is obvious the Shakers used them not only for practical but also for aesthetic purposes to give the room a total horizontal unity.

Around the front periphery of the room were two or three raised levels for benches, painted chocolate brown. These were for spectators from the "world" who wished to watch the Shaker sabbath services. It was a favorite summer pastime in the late 19th century for the well-to-do Victorian tourist at Poland Spring and other summer resorts to come to Sabbathday Lake or Alfred to gawk at the "curious Shakers" and to stop at the Shaker Store to purchase as souvenirs any of the numerous "fancy goods" the Shaker Sisters made for sale. The two staircases at either end of the building were removed at Sabbathday Lake in 1839 so that more benches could be installed. An ell at the north end accommodated a new staircase to the second floor. The building has always been painted white and, in fact, was originally the only building so colored. All the other structures in a Shaker community were painted with the less expensive paints made from earth tones, which made the church even more distinctive to visitors.

The meetinghouse at Alfred was lost by fire in 1902 and most of Brother Moses' other meetinghouses have been destroyed or altered. The one at Shirley was moved to Hancock in 1962 and restored as part of that museum village's presentation. It gives a good impression of how it appeared originally, but the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake are proud that their church is the most original. Many people find that the extreme straightforwardness, simplicity, and practicality of Shaker architecture makes for the uninteresting and drab. Yet a full consciousness of the basic aim of Shaker architecture had to result in good design. It had to be good because it lacked pretentiousness. Shaker structures before the Civil War all had a marked similarity, for it seemed that all human functions had been reduced to a common denominator that the Believers had found in their religion. To Brother Moses Johnson should go the credit for starting that desire for good design.

Marius B. Peladeau

NOTES

This article is based on the author's original research which was first published as "The Shaker Meetinghouses of Moses Johnson", *The Magazine Antiques*, Vol. XCVIII, No. 4, October, 1970, pp. 594-99. The data on Johnson is based on interviews and correspondence with Sister R. Mildred Barker, Trustee, Sabbathday Lake; the above mentioned Sisters Bertha Lindsay and Marguerite Frost at Canterbury; Robert F. W. Meader, then Director of The Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, New York; and an examination of manuscript and printed records in the libraries at Sabbathday Lake, Canterbury, The Shaker Museum, Library of Congress, and Historic American Buildings Survey.

The Sabbathday Lake meetinghouse is included as part of the guided tour available at the Village during the summer season. Visitors are urged to ascertain exact museum hours in advance.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY BROTHER MOSES JOHNSON

Shaker Meetinghouse, Alfred, 1793-94, Destroyed
Shaker Meetinghouse, Sabbathday Lake, New Gloucester, 1794,
Extant.

Volume V, Number 11, 1988

Published by the
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street, Augusta, Maine 04333

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
Roger G. Reed, Associate Editor

*This publication has been financed in part with federal funds from
the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.*